

Video Art

VICTOR ANCONA



VIDEO-GENERATED PHOTOGRAPHS: Creating Still Images of the Imagination

Two years ago the New York-based Artists Talk on Art—a forum for artists to meet, talk and listen to each other—presented an evening on “Videographs—Painterly Images Squeezed From the Tube,” in which a number of artists presented color slides of their work and described how they were produced. The program, moderated by Doug Sheer, listed George Brown, Laurie Spiegel, Jacqueline Skiles, Edin Velez, and Dorothy Westby as those producing videographs—still photographs produced by aiming a camera at a video monitor whose imagery was created by

the artist.

In December 1979, video-processed color photographs by Carl Geiger, Peggy Kay and Norman Pollack were exhibited during the Image Processing Show curated by Shalom Gorewitz at The Kitchen Center, New York City.

I don't know if any of the Artists Talk on Art panel members continued their pursuit of videographic stills. Along comes indefatigable Laurence M. Gartel proclaiming himself the “innovator of video-still photography”—an updated version of the videograph? “I expanded on something that wasn't there at the time,” said Gartel. “Daguerre was on one side of the world, Gartel was on the other.”


For years, artists have made still pho-

tographs from their videotapes for purposes of documentation and promotion of their works. While these videographers were busy expressing their ideas through the medium's time-based characteristics, a small but growing band of artists, exemplified by Peggy Kay, Norman Pollack, Mary Ross, and Larry Gartel, have deliberately chosen to swing in the opposite direction: they are using their unique vision and their creative energies to produce video-generated still images on film.

All four artists have had residencies at the Experimental Television Center (ETC) at Owego, New York, using the center's electronic image processing system. Their different histories, approaches and interests produce works that are a unique expression of each artist—proof that technology does not necessarily force practitioners into a common mold.

Since there is a strong affinity between photography and videography, non-purists use the characteristics of both media to create works of interest to themselves and others. Not everyone has the ability to create time-based work. The four artists are using the latest advances in electronic image manipulation to create imaginative still photographs.

The work of these video still artists can be seen on pages 44 through 46.



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According to Larry Gartel, who has a penchant for hyperbole, "The essence of video-still photography is to capture the subject involved with the ongoing evolution of life and freeze a specific moment in time for further consultation." If Gartel sounds like a photographer, he is one, although he considers a documentary photographer "a reporter, a passive voyeur—not an artist."

Why do artists manipulate images? Larry Gartel is dissatisfied with original imagery because he "cannot accept life as a pure document of what exists—there has to be more to life than the obvious." The electronic medium gives him an instant palette to manipulate color, texture, form and line.

Peggy Kay works off the memory of a place, adding emotional and romantic overtones—"things that have passed." She likes to bridge the real with the abstract. For Mary Ross, manipulating images helps her "achieve her own voice." While Mary has a great appreciation for the realistic photographic image, it does not represent her persona. "Straight camera imagery is too easily comprehended." In her work she strives for depth, intensity, sincerity, technical refinement and idiomatic originality.

Mary Ross uses primary source material consisting of her own slides, negatives, prints, as well as live models and videotapes. Larry Gartel often sets up a situation: a still life or live model in front of one or more video cameras. Peggy Kay's original image repertoire includes a wide variety of subjects: her own slides of people and places, flowers, architectural details, textures and translucent found material, usually printed. Most of Norman Pollack's original imagery consists of a storehouse of physical material rather than recognizable objects: Lucite shapes, pieces of Mylar, shaving cream and cotton sheeting, all shot with black and white video cameras. First he painstakingly creates a multi-layered construction, then he begins to manipulate and colorize the image.

Mary Ross

The oft repeated theme in the work of Mary Ross is "People: Real and Abstract," with a subtheme of dance photographs. Her images, often abstracted, always contain certain recognizable elements. "I use the video process to appeal to the imagination," said Mary. "I use color in an expressionistic manner to create a mood, to suggest a psychological state of being." Because of the electronic colors, many

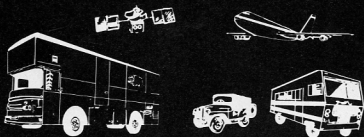
of her photographs have a decorative quality as objects, while her black and white images are so abstracted as to become a kind of calligraphy, as in her Ballet Series.

Mary Ross likes to create a sense of movement, texture and visual excitement by using video characteristics such as distortion, super-imposition, multiple mixing, layering, keying and system "noise." Being a photographer, she uses her darkroom to further manipulate, define and refine her images to correspond to her vision. "I enjoy the creative freedom the video processing system offers me to reconstruct, isolate and recreate an image from 'real time.'" She works a great deal with the Paik/Abe video synthesizer containing positive-negative, keying and mixing functions.

After processing an image, Mary Ross photographs it directly from the monitor screen, either accepting the image as is, or manipulating it further in her darkroom. "My work depends as much on the use of creative camera and darkroom techniques as it does on my knowledge and use of video technology." Her "Self Portrait" was colorized at ETC through a combination of the Jones 4-channel colorizer and keyers and the ELF computer, which triggered the changes in the image. The artist

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chose the particular image for its retrospective and mask-like qualities.

"Runaway, Las Vegas" is a result of one of Mary's favorite techniques: slide montage, or "sandwiching." The pensive woman's face was photographed on slide film from a black and white videotape, the light from the tv screen and lack of resolution giving it a pale, artificial, impersonal quality. Mary then juxtaposed the face with her slide of the Las Vegas strip at night taken through a prism.

Her "Danse Macabre" is an interpretation of a traditional theme in art. Using color film balanced for daylight, Mary Ross made a slide of a skull from a black and white videotape. Unfiltered, a bluish cast resulted. During the exposure, Mary deliberately held down the still mode of the videotape recorder, creating the white "noise" going through the image. Secondly, she placed an enlarged Kodalith high-contrast negative of the dancers on the front of the monitor screen. She rewound a blank videotape, creating the "noise" to be seen through the clear areas of the Kodalith. She then photographed the results on Tri-X film and "sandwiched" the resulting negative with the color slide of the skull for the final image. (In reproduction, the skull

could barely be seen.)

Mary Ross also produces video-generated sequential photographs. "The Cardinals' Dilemma," of which two of the eight sequences are reproduced in this issue, are a series of synthesized images from a single color slide taken in Vatican City. The feeling of movement was created by focusing several video cameras on different parts of the scene, mixing and colorizing the images, then reassembling them into a procession-like sequence. I found Mary Ross' imaginative Dance Series most successful in carrying out her intentions of conveying reality with semi-abstract imagery.

We are reminded by Mary Ross that careful evaluation is necessary to determine whether a photograph is valid as a video still. "The electronic system generates so much information that one must be selective and retain only the best from the vast amount of possible variations. Not every effort in processing is going to create a meaningful work. Many hours of careful preparation, experimentation, balancing of systems and further darkroom work go into the production of my prints."

Mary Ross' background is mostly photographic, consisting of teaching, exhibiting and doing free-lance work in the

Binghamton, New York area. Five years ago she received the Dr. Robert Zappert Award for her color photography, presented by GAF Corporation, and last year she was the recipient of a New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) co-production grant through ETC. Mary is now working extensively at creating video-generated still photographs and continues to use closed-circuit live video and pre-recorded process video in multi-media performances with her composer-husband Eric.

At ETC, Mary tells the designer-technician what she has in mind. He sets up the hardware, then it's up to her to use it creatively. "It's a collaborative effort up to a point, then I must take over since they are my ideas, my images. In the process, I'm forced to learn the technology as well."

Larry Gartel

Larry Gartel began art school at the age of five, later winning a scholarship to a special children's class at Pratt Institute. He attended the High School of Music and Art, and then enrolled at the School of Visual Arts, New York, where he received a B.F.A. degree in photography (1977). Gartel is haunted by "something artists have been trying to figure out for centuries—how to make

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art and still earn a living." He finally found the right medium to express himself—photography. "Now I do art and make a living at the same time," he said.

In 1976, during a brief sojourn in Buffalo, Larry Gartel discovered video at Media Study. . . "WOW!" Colorizers, synthesizers and other electronic gear allowed him a free hand to manipulate and process images—quickly! With a camera in hand, Gartel now finds himself to be more of a composer-arranger than an artist laboriously drawing or painting an image. He can express himself emotionally through color and rearrangement and processing of natural images without losing realism. After much experimentation, he began to focus on content. His video-generated portraits are his most successful subjects to date.

Larry Gartel is beginning to garner a lucrative market for his video portraits—a manipulated and colorized version of the traditional individual or family photographic portrait. As he put it, "one satisfied customer tells another, and another and another. People are overjoyed with their portraits."

Why would anyone want a video portrait? "Because it depicts people like they have never been shown before. It

moves them into a mode of the future, and they see their portrait as an enlarged television image—it makes them tv stars in their own home." Scale is important to Larry. "I try to sell the impact of size—at least a 30"x40" enlargement. A less important work can be made impressive by size alone, and a larger picture commands more money." By electronically manipulating the image, Gartel is able to quickly make 15 to 20 variations for the sitter to choose from. He may also sell a quantity of smaller prints with varying color combinations and effects. "The intensity of emotional color is very attractive to my subjects," added Larry.

Larry Gartel's special need to be commercially successful results in an all-out self-promotional effort in print, the medium he knows best and respects the most. Articles and cover photographs have appeared in numerous magazines, and a slew of specialized publications here and in England have scheduled illustrated stories. One-man exhibitions of his work are also in the offing.

The "You-can-create-video-art-like-this" type of feature article authored or condoned by Larry Gartel in popular video and photo magazines diminishes his own work in the eyes of the art world. It takes more than a twist of the

sharpness, hue, color and brightness dials of a tv receiver and then taking a picture of the resulting image to produce the creative work Gartel professes anyone can make.

As an amateur photographer, I enjoy taking pictures, including those staring at me from my tv—especially the color-intense, scrambled images freely offered to non-subscribers to HBO. While I've made large prints from my color slides, in no way can they be categorized as art since I had no part in creating the video-generated imagery. With a smidgen of visual awareness and a little technical expertise, I merely documented what I saw—thanks to HBO, my cable system, Nikon and Eastman Kodak.

Gartel's Shirt-and-Tie Series were setups in his home, "right on my bed!" After lighting his still-life subjects properly, he recorded the images on his portable JVC equipment, then brought the videotape to a studio for colorizing. The Car Series, shot in California, contain more abstractions with hints of realism. The car images were manipulated at Inter-Media Art Center (IMAC), Bayville, New York. Both series, including the Mannequin Group, are examples of Gartel's "self-expression" ready for instant promotion and hopeful sale—

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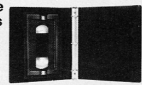
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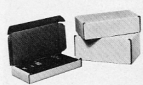
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If there are differences between commercial and fine art, Larry Gartel helps to blur and dispell them. "Fine art is a personal statement, true, but commerce can't wait for the artist to produce something, so they call upon the technically competent and creative individual to give them just what they want." At what point does an artist begin to shape his or her work for the marketplace, and at what point does the work begin to suffer?

Larry Gartel learned two important elements in the process of making a compelling work: successful manipulation of the gray scale, and lighting. "With video, it's so easy to get what you want—providing you know what you want to get." Although Larry Gartel moved from drawing, to painting, to graphics, to photography and videography, he is back at drawing with an electronic stylus, using the AVA Ampex System. Whether that will help or hinder the sale of his work does not seem to faze him—he is more anxious to try new ways of expressing himself, which after all, is the artist's cogent need.

Peggy Kay

Almost by way of apology, Peggy Kay

If there are differences between commercial and fine art, Gartel helps to blur and dispell them.

says "there is movement while creating a still image." She uses ETC's facilities as an electronic darkroom. She claims that the instantaneous processing speeds the understanding of light and color as it relates to traditional painterly concerns. "As opposed to dance and performance, the image is concrete and can be studied and changed." At first, Peggy was using her camera to make photographic images, not necessarily shooting for video-processing. Now she is beginning to understand which images can and should be processed and which should remain "objective, real."

Peggy Kay, wife of Shalom Gorewitz (see **Videography**, November, 1980), received a B.A. in Synaesthetic Education and an M.A. in Early childhood Education from Syracuse University, where she became involved in video. She then studied at the Merce Cunningham Dance Studio, later dancing with the Mercer Street Dance Group and Simone Forti, among others. Her ego, however, wasn't identified with

performance. Admitting to herself that she wasn't disciplined enough to remain in dance, she moved on to study at the International Center of Photography while giving an in-service training course on "Movement in the Classroom" for teachers in the Great Neck, New York, public schools.

"By working with children, remembering my own childhood experiences, stimulated by nature, working off my sensory experiences, observing the reality of time flow in space, catching details of movement while moving, is what I'm about in video," Peggy said. "I'm working off a background in synaesthetic education, which tries to unite media for sensual effect." She added that she was developing a craft for self-expression by working with the cross-overs, the similarities and the differences among the various art forms, and wonders if ultimately processing will change from chemical to electronic. If so, with what new technique will she be able to "capture the gesture in a frozen

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frame?" Most of her work has a story idea, an emotional narrative the viewer may or may not perceive. She also produces works that present the formal elements of the medium, offering us pure aesthetic pleasure.

While Peggy Kay has removed herself from the dance stage, Mary Ross is engrossed in dance images. Norman Pollack and Larry Gartel see themselves "eventually doing a dance videotape." Ross, coming from a still photography background, realizes the problem and difficulties of making videotapes. "A time-based medium takes time and effort to master." In time, Mary Ross' work will not change thematically but will improve technically. "It's going to improve because I'm advancing in my knowledge of the synthesizer, and I have a long way to go with that."

Norman Pollack

Video-generated stills have intrigued Norman Pollack ever since he started working in video eight years ago. "In a sense, I want to hold on to that phosphor—to harness the electron and make it stand still. At times the moving image is too amorphous—you want to touch, feel and husband the illusive image. The moment is so utterly transitory, so utterly alive, that I want to cap-

ture it before it eludes me," he said.

Pollack is excited over the rapid breakthroughs taking place in video technology and the increasingly divergent paths and expressions taken by artists involved in the medium. He is involved in the still video image as a serious art form. Each piece that Pollack creates is developed within the context of the video still-frame mode, within a specific and calculated passage of time—guiding and shaping many aspects that occur simultaneously within one video frame. The fixed state is accounted for by photographing each image with color film from which prints are then made—hence his own classification of his work as "Photo/Synthesis." While Norman's work expresses the presence of technology, his intent is to "humanize the electronic medium by using its technology to create dynamic and sensual imagery."

Norman Pollack sees himself as "an electronic painter" using the system from scratch rather than an artist using video simply to synthesize a pre-selected image. His latest works solve highly complex technical problems but deliver lesser emotional impact than his earlier works, according to this viewer.

"The Rider" was a black and white videotape made by Pollack of a cyclist in

the park, which he later processed in the studio. He enhanced the feeling of movement by using interacting wave form oscillators at various speeds to determine the gray level, then colorized the image. Once Pollack refines the image, he stops the recorder and is ready to take a still image of his labors. He shoots in the still frame mode with his Nikon always set at a thirtieth of a second. He titles his video-generated stills not only to identify them but "to ground them with a human frame of reference."

Proof of Norman Pollack's continuing interest in producing videotapes, is his recent "Music Visions," a ten-minute tour de force that won him The Qube Choice Award in the 1980 Athens Video Festival. Pollack's tape was one of 12 chosen by the festival committee to air on Qube, "the world's first two-way cable television system" in Columbus, Ohio. Using their response buttons, Qube subscribers rated each video entry on a scale from one through five. "Music Visions" received the highest score. Norman is primarily interested in creating visual backdrops to accompany concert performers, as well as creating video effects for use in films. "I see my video-generated stills as an important ancillary to my interest in electronic set

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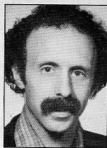
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All four photographers/videographers use 35mm SLRs to produce their final stills. Gartel uses a Pentax ME "because the shutter is easy to regulate—so as not to catch the scan lines." He shoots monitor images at a thirtieth or an eighth of a second, using a tripod for steadiness. Although he doesn't use Nikon equipment, Gartel was given a month-long one-man show of his "video-still photography" at the Nikon House Gallery in Rockefeller Center, New York, in April 1980.

Since the end product is a photographic print, Mary Ross, Norman Pollack and Larry Gartel prefer Cibachromes for archival considerations, plus the high gloss and enhancement of the bold electronic video colors. Peggy Kay on the other hand, dislikes Cibachrome's high gloss and is partial to showing her work through projected color slides. As for print size, Pollack prefers 16"x20" prints, which he prices between \$175 and \$300, but prefers the more costly 24"x30" for limited editions. Mary Ross offers her work in more diminutive sizes: 4"x5" at \$150; 8"x10" at \$250; 14"x16" at \$350. For Larry Gartel, the larger the print the better: 52"x96" is O.K. with him. All would like to be represented in art/photo galleries.

Washington View

ALAN GREEN



PROGRAM EXPORTS: CPB Looks to Increase the Flow

Public television in the United States has received perhaps its harshest criticism from those who complain that the system has failed to achieve a balance of trade with its foreign counterparts. Specifically, the critics have pointed to a Public Broadcasting Service schedule, which, they say, has had anything but a dearth of British programming.

Videography welcomes Alan Green to our staff of contributing editors. Green is a principal in a recently formed news gathering organization called The City Desk. He is a former staff writer for Broadcasting magazine. Starting this month, Green will be reporting on communications from our nation's capital.

PBS, however, which maintains that the criticism is unfounded, points to the most recent available export figures as proof of its position. According to PBS, for fiscal year 1979 public television exported 954 hours of programming, at a cost of \$2.5 million—a nine percent dollar increase over the previous year's total of \$2.3 million. But while the dollar figure was up, the number of hours of programming exported during the year actually dropped three percent, from 987, with the work of only nine stations and two independents. (Children's Television Workshop and Family Communications, Inc.) finding its way overseas.

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